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Testimony by
Deacon David Reynolds
on H.B. 5489
“An Act Concerning Secondary School Reform”
Before the Committee on Education
March 15, 2010

The Connecticut Catholic Public Affairs Conference, the public advocacy office of Connecticut's Catholic Bishops, while understanding the underlying premise of H.B. 5489, has several concerns about specific sections of the proposed legislation. Although the Conference usually does not comment on legislation concerning public school issues, we felt it necessary to present our concerns on this particular bill.

The stated goal of H.B. 5489 is to implement the recommendations of the Program Review and Investigations Committee concerning alignment of post-secondary education and employment. In other words, to address the perceived lack of strong academic skills in our high school graduates as they move into higher education and eventual employment. The bill attempts to address this concern by raising the mandatory requirements for high school graduation in several areas of study and the total number of required graduation credits. The concerns the Conference has are focused on the proposed one credit requirement for health education, and the ability to apply one-half credit of health education from middle school to this high school graduation requirement. These recommendations were rejected by the Program Review and Investigations Committee just before they voted down a similar piece of legislation, H.B. 5165, last Friday, March 11, 2010. The rejected proposal included a health education requirement of only a half credit, not the one credit requirement, with the middle school option, you are considering today.

The Conference has no objection to the half credit in health education proposed in the legislation considered by the Program Review and Investigations Committee. We realize the importance of sharing accurate health information with students; whether that education be in the areas of nutrition, exercise, or reducing risky behaviors. However, we do have concerns when it becomes obvious that this legislation is being viewed by several interest groups, primarily Planned Parenthood and members of their Healthy Teen CT coalition, as an indirect

vehicle to promote their vision of sexuality education in our public schools. Risky sexual behavior among teens must be curtailed. Where the Conference, and many parents in this state, disagree with the proponents of the language in this legislation is how to deliver that message and what that message should contain. The proponents of the mandatory one health credit requirement, and the middle school half credit provision, clearly seek to use this legislation as a first step in modifying the face of sexuality education in our public schools.

The Conference does not believe a piece of important legislation concerning the academic proficiency of our high school students should be turned into a piece of legislation about mandatory comprehensive sex education. While a half credit requirement for health education sets a minimum standard that most high schools in our state are already achieving, any requirements beyond that turn into an unfunded and unnecessary mandate. Local boards of education face many difficult decisions in allocating limited funds and creating academic programs that meet the needs of their students. An additional mandate, created to meet the demands of a special interest group, is not necessary or prudent at this time. If the legislature intends to modify sexuality education in our schools it should be done in a separate piece of legislation, so it can be fully and appropriately debated. Otherwise, it should be left to local control on how this topic should be balanced with other academic demands within our struggling public school systems.

The proposal to allow a half credit of middle school health education to be used to meet part of the one credit health education graduation requirement is a very flawed concept. First, this option does not relieve the burden on the high school to provide a full one credit program. High schools would still be mandated to provide a one credit program of health education to all its students. That requirement is not lessened in any way by allowing the application of middle school credit to the graduation requirement. Not all students entering the high school, such as transfer students, may have had an equivalent health education course in middle school. Therefore, the high school must offer a full credit program. Secondly, the health education provided in middle school would not, and should not, be directly equivalent to a health education program offered in high school. This approach may be valid in areas such as mathematics or foreign languages, where the content should be equivalent. Algebra I is Algebra I. This would not be true in the area of sexuality education, where the topics discussed must be age appropriate and would definitely vary by grade level.

The Conference urges the Education Committee not to turn a bill aimed at improving the academic performance of our high school graduates into a piece of legislation used for the promotion of comprehensive sexuality education. Also, the burden of a one credit high school graduation requirement in health education can easily be viewed as an additional unnecessary mandate on our local boards of education. The Conference urges you to remove the current language relating to health education from this legislation.